DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 194 157 JC 800 595

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TITLE A Brief Manual on the Building of a Neighborhood Coalition.
INSTITUTION Northern Essex Community Coll., Haverhill, Mass.
SPONS AGENCY Massachusetts State Board of Higher Education, Boston.
PUB DATE [80]
NOTE 19p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Community Colleges; *Community Development; Community Study; Financial Support; Leadership Responsibility; *Neighborhoods; Organizational Development; Organizational Objectives; School Community Relationship; Staff Role; Two Year Colleges

ABSTRACT

Guidelines for the organization and operation of neighborhood development programs are provided, based on the experiences of a community coalition coordinated by Northern Essex Community College (NECC). This neighborhood development project attempted to provide staff support to local neighborhood associations, structure a coalition among the associations for greater political visibility, provide workshops on community problems, and conduct a survey of adolescent needs. The steps in the assessment of community needs are discussed first, including consultation with neighborhood leaders and organized community analysis research. The bulk of the manual examines 11 considerations in project organization and operation: yielding leadership to the neighborhood residents themselves; providing programs which are beneficial to the community at large, of which the neighborhood is only a part; acquiring staff trained in organizational development; providing flexibility in project agenda; utilizing the occupational know-how and life experiences of participants; planning for continued funding; helping neighborhood leaders manage time and delegate responsibility; broadening the base of the coalition through public relations; setting realistic goals; collecting data for government agencies; avoiding conflicts between member associations; and understanding the implications of using political, social, and media power. (JP)

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A BRIEF MANUAL

ON THE

BUILDING OF A NEIGHBORHOOD COALITION

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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Stemming From The

Northern Essex Community College

Neighborhood Development Project

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INTRODUCTION

This manual describes the experiences of the participants and staff of the Haverhill Neighborhood Project, sponsored by a Title I-A Grant from the Post-Secondary Education Commission of the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education. The material in the manual grew as the project grew.

The project was an educational experience for all involved, for the staff as well as the Neighborhood members. As a unit, the staff and the members consistently attempted to apply new learnings. This process lent an intensity and intimacy to the experiences shared by all involved. Because of this type of interaction, resulting in sizeable Neighborhood input, the material in this report might be unique to Haverhill as opposed to material that can serve as a general guideline to neighborhood work.

The concept of neighborhood development has become very popular over the past few years. In some cases, this may simply serve political expediency. Certainly, in a society characterized by urbanization, alienation, and mobility, the neighborhoods may represent a kind of identification and intimacy that is no longer available elsewhere. This appeared to be true in Haverhill. Although there were shifts in the boundaries and in the population of defined neighborhoods, a positive feeling existed around each of them that did not seem to exist toward the city at large.

As our project drew to an end, we were pleased with what had occurred. Early preparations had been made for the Neighborhood Coalition to continue after the grant ended, and there was a reinforced feeling of the strength, knowledge, skill, and potential that lies in the leadership and grass roots

organization of the people who live in Neighborhoods. All of this had been anticipated by those who organized the project and worked with it, but the proof in action was still impressive. This, then, is what was learned from one year of the Haverhill Neighborhood Coalition, consisting of:

The Acre Neighborhood Association
Ayers Village Neighborhood Association
Bradford Neighborhood Association
Broad-Hill-River Neighborhood Association
Crescent Farms Neighborhood Association
The Highlands Neighborhood Association
Mount Washington Neighborhood Association
Riverside Neighborhood Association
Rocks Village Neighborhood Association
Southeast Bradford Neighborhood Association
Walnut Square Neighborhood Association
Ward Hill Neighborhood Association
Upper Main Street Neighborhood Association

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BACKGROUND

This project was developed in Haverhill, Massachusetts, a city of 47,000 persons, located in the Merrimack River Valley and next to the New Hampshire border. Haverhill was formerly a shoe and leather manufacturing center which succumbed to the manufacturing decline of northeastern cities. Despite the fact that it has recently attracted some industrial parks and is bordered by high-technology growth, the city suffers badly from business and property deterioration and the problems resulting from this type of deterioration. The old Victorian houses, once beautiful, went from single homes to multiple dwellings, then to tenements, and finally, to abandonment, causing financial loss and creating fire hazards in many areas of the city.

Although there was a clear-cut attitude of negativism within the city, the Neighborhoods had a strong historical tradition in Haverhill, and the residents' pride and attachment to the Neighborhoods still existed.

Neighborhood boundaries were defined in two ways. First, there was the emotional concept of a Neighborhood, defined by the memory and image people had of a given area when that area was named. The second definition centered around the boundaries drawn by residents for purposes of applications for block grants and other forms of funding. For the purposes of the Coalition, the boundaries defined by individual Neighborhood Associations were accepted. In the same way, Neighborhood Associations defined their own structure and chose their officers.

Many of the Neighborhood Associations were incorporated, and the Coalition, itself, is now planning for incorporation. That move will probably bring into being more stringent definitions around the concept of the Neighborhood Association.

In 1979, Northern Essex Community College, in conjunction with seven Neighborhood Associations, received a Title I-A Grant to achieve the following:

a) Develop a Coalition of seven Neighborhood Associations which would build a vehicle of communications among the Neighborhoods, provide staff support, and give community consultation.

b) Structure that Coalition to be a vehicle for communication with useful governmental agencies on all levels.

c) Provide a series of workshops on skill development in dealing with specific problems as identified by the Neighborhood Associations.

d) Conduct a survey of adolescent needs in the community.

e) Publish a final report and this manual.

In the autumn of 1979, Northern Essex formed a contract with the Haverhill Growth Alliance to facilitate the program. The Growth Alliance is a private, non-profit, area-wide labor-management-government steering committee staffed by community and process consultants and educators. The advantage of this coordination was that it allowed for an amalgamation of the skills already present in the staff with the vast range of community involvement with HGA.

The union was also a step toward future effectiveness. The Neighborhood Coalition became the Neighborhood Task Force of the Alliance, and this insured that at the grant's end, the program could remain alive, and could maintain continuity.

STRUCTURE

The original group consisted of the Presidents of seven Neighborhood Associations, one Coalition Co-chairman from those Presidents, and one Co-chairman from the College (also coincidentally a member of a Neighborhood Association), the grant manager from Northern Essex, and the facilitator/consultant. The group met monthly, in the evening, at the College.

ACTION RESEARCH

The two methods of operation behind the work of this project were the concepts of process consultation and of action research. The implications of the first are that the third party professionals act as process facilitators. This will be discussed further in the section on ownership. The second is that the model, under which we worked, was that of action research, a relatively live process that allows for fairly immediate implementation of learnings.

THE STEPS OF ACTION RESEARCH:

1. Assess the needs of the group. Time must be spent with each element of the group to carefully determine what individual needs exist for each organization, including what needs they have from the Coalition. In this group's case, the facilitator met with each organizational president and, usually, with one other member of the Association, in order to determine these needs. Information was

gathered through a survey that not only gave the staff a picture of the needs, but also gave a sketch of the Association.

2. Formulate an action plan. Based upon the needs as stated, a series of action steps can be drawn up that is simple and skeletal at first, but which grows progressively more complex as needed detail is defined.

3. Implement the plan. Responsibilities are clearly assigned.

4. Evaluate the plan. Evaluation, in terms of this project, involves looking at what went well, what did not go well, where problems existed and how they originated, what could have been done more effectively, and what learnings can be utilized in the future. It is clearly not productive to assess the overall task as having been successfull or non-successful. Blame directed at self or others lowers the energies of the group and produces a mentality less creative and less willing to take risks.

5. Reassess the needs. Since any group is a living thing constantly in process, the needs of the Coalition continually change. For example, we found that from the inception of the project to the completion of the first needs assessment, there was already a change in educational desires. The group became less interested in formal workshops and more desirous of small seminars and individual learnings in organization. Later, after foundations were laid, these needs changed again and, upon request, workshops were implemented once more.

The action research enabled the staff and participants to continuously be aware of what was going on. They were able to use evaluation techniques during the program's operation, and were, therefore, able to direct and enhance the process. This proved to be more valuable than waiting until the end of the program at which time, evaluative statements would be more "grades" than useful material.

ROLE OF THE TRAINEES

Participants came into the Coalition with an agenda developed in their neighborhoods. The first task of the staff was to build the link of common concerns and focus for the group. In this case, structured group techniques of agenda formation were useful.

The most important functions of the staff were organizational and follow-up work. Between meetings, the staff pursued issues and details stemming from the previous meeting. A continuous responsibility of the staff was to keep the Coalition focused. It developed the agenda and the printed material for the next meeting.

There was a danger that the staff would become the leaders and, therefore, foster dependence. To avoid this, the staff identified its role as one of service to the participants. Even though the staff developed the meeting agendas, the content of those agendas were participant generated.

The staff also had to be continuously aware of the difference between their needs and interests versus those of the group. The staff had to allow the group to follow its own interests and had to be willing to let go of staff interest. If it had not done so, the Coalition would have been reduced to a staff project, in which both attendance and interest would soon dissipate.

Another dilemma for staff is caused by the fact that group development is a slow process. The staff is often evaluating the group performance based on expectations of functioning methods which are years away. The staff must be role models for good membership traits, and must process group interaction

to help foster group development. However, this is not usually the central theme for the participants. Too much emphasis on process may scare or bore the members.

The staff role is a difficult one. A staff member must be active and organize without taking over. One must be willing to allow the group to develop its own purpose, often at the expense of the goals envisioned by the staff. One must monitor the group dynamics, but only when it is of value to do so, and when staff input will be well received. The process is slow, but the rewards are great.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Any project that attempts to build a Coalition will need to do some organizing and will need to take community action. However, the concept of community devevelopment is a more productive one for the present time than either of the two more limited definitions mentioned. Neighborhoods are part of a community at large and the state of that community, its resources, its political base, its agencies, values, and all other elements must be seriously considered as the milieu in which the Coalition will exist. Each affects the other.

The directions chosen by the Coalition must be productive to the community as a whole, and must be inclusive of its other elements to be successful. Although, as in our case, the Coalition will usually have a number of desires it wishes to gain from the community, there must be an interactive process in which the Coalition is seen as a force working for community improvement.

Any group which achieves power will automatically become suspect as a

threat, yet without that power, the concept of Coalition is meaningless. Only through commitment to the community as a whole, and only through visible desire to develop that community, can such a threat be minimized or eliminated.

STAFFING

There is a strong necessity for trained, objective third-person staffing for a project such as this, particularly after the project becomes institutionalized. This grant provided for half-time staffing. That would be the minimal need, and we feel it would be more productive if more staff support were available.

Facilitation should be available from someone trained in organizational development, community development, and group process skills. This should be augmented by half-time secretarial help. Maintenance of extensive communications links demands massive amounts of mailings and information distribution. While, ideally, the Neighborhood Associations might be able to handle this, in practice, they have neither the funding nor the resources to do so.

The skill and objectivity of the consultant can go far to alleviate the types of semi-political suspicion that surrounds Neighborhood leaders as their power becomes more noticeable and pervasive. It also serves to prevent inter-association jealousies and many other potential problems. This person can be associated with another agency within the community, but only if the repute of that agency is totally clear of allegiance to any particular force within the community.

OWNERSHIP

While staff is a necessity, it is mandatory that any project or Coalition belong to the participants and that that ownership be clearly defined. When

initial plans are structured and staff develops an ownership of those plans, it is impossible for the group to move should they desire to change the plans. Adherence to theory can be poisonous to a developing group.

Inevitably, times will arise when professional staff believes it "knows what is organizationally best for the group" or something similar centering around opportunity. It is then very necessary to have staff which can comfortably yield ownership to those to whom the project belongs. Of all of the concepts and ideas which will be expressed here, this placement and adherence to ownership may have the most importance, for it deals not only with technique but with the maintenance of ethical boundaries.

FLEXIBILITY

Any dynamic entity requires the room to grow and change. Although a Coalition must define its ends, there must be room for constant reassessment of the mission, and substantial room for the methods to change. In our case, the group changed a list of workshops into individual study, seminars, and workshops. They dropped an adolescent survey in favor of programs developed with police and judiciary, and greatly expanded their involvement with learning organizational skills and strategies and tactics of power.

SKILL-BUILDING TECHNIQUES AND LEARNING PROCEDURES

The procedures of adult education, in our belief, are the foundations of the way in which people learn best. The learning must be self-directed (rather than imposed by even the most "knowledgeable" professional), and it must be participative. The philosophy behind adult education is that people know what is best for them and how this can best be achieved.

Furthermore, the group will have enormous numbers of resources within it. The life experiences, the occupational know-how, and all of the other repetoire of knowledge that lies within the group should be utilized. This type of participation is in the best interests of learning; it further enhances ownership and teaches utilization of differences among people.

In addition to the topics designated for learning matter by our Coalition (centering largely around property restoration and maintenance, code enforcement, and vandalism), we found that it was necessary to spend a significant amount of time on group process skills and interpersonal skills. These might include confrontational techniques. These skills are important to the maintenance and relationship building within the Coalition not only so that there can be a Coalition, but also because it becomes increasingly critical as the leadership interacts with a demanding and varied external environment.

EARLY PLANNING FOR CONTINUATION

Time should be spent planning for the continuing life and support of any group from the onset of the project. It takes time to identify potential resources and to develop them.

As a project reaches its mid-point and progresses past that, the anxiety level about its maintenance increases markedly, therefore, that should not be the time when continuity planning begins. If future needs center around developing a grant or seeking funding, then a year in advance is not a significantly long time to apply for such funding. If the group is to come under the shelter of another organization, as occurred in the Haverhill project, there must be time to integrate and negotiate so that the transition may be smooth and all potential issues identified and negotiated prior to the time that the new alliance takes place.

Target projects which existed under a terminal grant and were not continued have been a commonplace occurrence over the last two decades. The sense of personal and social futility engendered by such expirations produces an air of negativism which might indicate that the communities would have been better off had those projects never existed.

ORGANIZATION

Understanding the dynamics of an organization is necessary to the building of an effective organization. This understanding includes the way in which organizations work, the importance of well planned meetings, the need for increased communications, and the necessity of insuring responsible follow-up. These factors form the foundation upon which a Coalition can be built.

This foundation establishment is crucial on both a Coalition level and on an individual Association level. To assist in the implementation of the latter, staff should be available for helping individual Association leaders build their own groups. The Associations might need help in areas like organizing, recruiting, developing problem-solving techniques, team-building, giving feedback, and publicizing activities.

Strength built within the individual Associations gives strength and energy to the larger Coalition. A number of strong individuals will work better together than a group where there is a great imbalance in power and strength.

In the case of the Haverhill project, meetings served as organizational learning laboratories. Pre-meeting preparations took place during each previous meeting. Moves made at meetings were analyzed by the action research model referred to earlier, and, then, discussion was made applicable for use in the Associations. Because the organizational principles were identified with the meeting the group had just experienced, the concepts had more meaning and, ultimately, more utility.

LEADERSHIP

Leadership must be representative of the group, and it must be effective. Leadership training is an important part of building the Coalition. Some leaders emerge from their Associations because they are the only ones willing to do the work or take the risks, or because they have charisma or political power. None of these reasons alone will create effective leadership.

It is necessary to continually groom leadership through a constant delegation of tasks and through board inclusion. Allowing all the power to be in a few hands, regardless of **how effective** those few may be, ultimately hurts the organization and does not allow for transitions during change.

Small leadership cores also prevent the good use of resources and energy. It becomes very easy for the strong, hard-working leader to be overutilized. We found that as Neighborhood Association leaders became Coalition leaders, and then were included in the leadership of the community at large, the number of meetings they attended were detrimental to their family and professional lives. Leaders need to be helped in determining how they might best manage time and delegate responsibilities for their own and the group's best interests.

MEMBERSHIP

Broad-based membership helps insure the effectiveness of a group. The wider the representation, the more power the Coalition has to achieve comfortable change and to satisfy the needs of communities rather than of special interest groups. The broader the base, the greater the ability to form links to various agencies that can be valuable resources. For example, as the Haverhill project came to an end, there were many groups around the city with a commitment to help the Coalition continue. A planning group was formed, consisting of members of various local and state agencies that were not only funding resources,

but were also well acquainted with the group because of continual contact.

The issue of inclusion has broader implications than its importance in the practical sense. The life of the Neighborhoods affects the community as a whole, and the belief of those involved with the Haverhill project has been that those who can be affecied by a process should be included in that process.

Initially, the Coalition was composed of the presidents of each of the Neighborhood Associations. This was a small group with no potential for growth. Well-meaning presidents might not bring back full results of meetings and there was no opportunity for public recognition.

We opened meetings up by encouraging each president to bring one other member with them. The "bring-a-buddy" system was encouraged over a period of time until approximately 100 Association members attended Coalition meetings regularly and received minutes. About 35-50 would be at a given meeting with some change in population from meeting to meeting. This meant that many more people in the community were aware of the Coalition; there was a feeling of strength and the potential for achievement at meetings where a significant number of persons appeared; and no president was indispensible to either the individual Association or the Coalition. This representation also tended to broaden the power base within individual Associations in the sense that information is power and many more persons now had information.

ACHIEVE THE POSSIBLE

Tackling issues too large to handle effectively can hurt an organization by creating feelings of failure. It is, therefore, first necessary to accurately assess what is possible, and to set goals accordingly.

The Neighborhood Coalition became quite sophisticated at balancing its needs for tangible results with longer-termed and more complex solutions for deeply rooted problems. While remaining aware of future goals, the Coalition would set easily accessible objectives when there was a need for an immediate sense of gratification.

CONFRONTATION IS LINKED TO DATA

One of the most difficult lessons for the Coalition members to learn was the enormous amount of data that must be generated prior to a confrontation. One group that confronted the Police Chief with what they saw as a severe traffic problem on a particular street were unable to give exact street numbers, times, and statistics, and, thereby, lost much of the impetus they might otherwise have achieved. In their eyes, simply being able to pinpoint the street seemed adequate evidence, but it was not enough to convince the Chief that deployment of a safety car was justified.

After learning considerably more about this data need, another group was able to tackle a powerful chain store by gathering extensive research material. Their data yielded facts and figures from five towns, including tax records and abatements. They followed this with careful analysis enabling them to put together a well-documented picture.

Convincing a group that tedious research results in a more potent argument than the nobility of the cause is not easy, but is clearly a necessity.

COALITION VS. INDIVIDUAL ASSOCIATION

As committed as members may be to the idea and fact of Coalition, there will, from time to time, be issues which arise that create a conflict between the interests of the Coalition with the interests of the individual Association.

The issue may have to do with the designation of power and prestige, the more immersed in the Coalition an Association might get, the less any given Association can retain an autonomous image. Another issue may pertain to grant application. An individual group applying for a grant might be in conflict with assigning the monies to be split between a number of groups. Whatever the issue, groups need to feel that their independence is not being hampered. Yet, they must also learn which types of behavior can jeopardize the Coalition.

There are also monies (usually radical in nature) that an official Coalition cannot make because of its broad obligations, but which are acceptable for particular factions to make because of their own special interests. The Haverhill Coalition tended to act as a unified power group when the concerns, principles, or ethics affected the group as a whole.

Members of the Coalitions must use caution in making public statements. It is very important that only a few people be given the specific responsibility of speaking for the Coalition and that communications be clear and pre-planned. The political implications of this cannot be overestimated.

POWER MUST BE UNDERSTOOD AND PROPERLY USED

A Coalition must be constantly aware of the implications of using political, social, and media power, and, in turn, of being used by these forces. It is probably a good idea to examine the various sources from which each of the Associations and the Coalition derive power and what other entities exist to which they give power. This should be done early in the formation of a group and should be a part of the study of milieus in which an organization exists.

The power of the media is invaluable to an organization. Announcements of meetings should appear in all local papers and on radio stations. Programs and purposes of the meeting should be elaborated upon. If a news release is

prepared and given out in time, most local papers will print it as is. After a meeting, if there was a program, a story can run giving details of what occurred. In addition to stories about the Coalition, each Association should be helped to develop a publicity network as well.

SUMMARY

This is a summary of the joint learnings from the Haverhill Neighborhood Project. It has not been intended to present great "universal truths" but only to share what this project learned experientally. If some ideas have been presented strongly enough to seem absolute, it was only because this project experienced them that strongly. If there is anything in which the Coalition had a lot of confidence, it was in the membership and in the process. Both reinforced the belief that the people know what is best for them and have the resources to bring that about. To watch ones process, either as individual or as a group, to constantly evaluate the moves made, and to reassess our future lent to the strength of the Haverhill Project.

There will always be concerns in building a Coalition and in maintaining it, including inter-and intra-organizational conflict; funding; division of labor; and jealousies. The Coalition is only a microcosm of any social structure. But self-awareness, organizational understanding, and process analysis can prevent these issues from becoming disasters.

Neighborhood development allows for identities to be developed, for intimacies to exist in anonymous urban settings, and for great strength to be achieved through Coalition.

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